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# Integrating the Web 2.0 Technologies in Romanian Public Universities. Towards a Blended Learning Model that addresses Troubled Student-Faculty Interaction

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## Abstract

Web 2.0 and Social Media are considered to be the future of learning, the appropriate tools to re-engage faculty with students in a collaborative, informal manner, radically ‘shifting’ the learning approaches towards a relationship of trust and collaboration. Thus, they challenge the traditional roles of the university, teacher and student, correspondingly. Nonetheless, there is a ‘digital disconnect’ between the rhetoric surrounding the blessings of these tools and the concerns of integrating them in the higher education system that is a matter of further scholar investigation. This paper discusses the issues of translating integrating Web 2.0 tools in Romanian Universities, highlighting the opportunities and challenges and pleading for a blended learning approach. It argues that the ‘replacement discourse’ may be affective in theory but, in practice, cultural differences, other disturbing factors and some advantages of the ‘old learning model’ must be taken into consideration. In this respect, the article proposes a model that could facilitate the integration of Web 2.0 technologies in higher education, focusing on idea of cooperation between teachers and students.

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## 1. Introduction. Crucial concerns

Web 2.0 technologies in general and Social Media, in particular, act as a ‘disruptive technology’ in several fields of application like media, commerce, culture or politics. They penetrated numerous markets, disrupted the social order and people’s lives and imposed dramatic but loose, uneven changes, with undisclosed consequences on a long term. Nowadays, eventually, they have reached to challenge now only the way people gather their information

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outside educational establishments, but the concept of formal education itself. In other words, the so-called 'Education 2.0', 'Pedagogy 2.0' or 'Learning 2.0' challenges the very nature of the traditional education system. This is why, Web 2.0 tools and platforms integration in universities – traditionally a conservatory and reluctant to changes entities – is a controversial issue. Not just from a technical point of view (which is frequently appealed), but from a deeply ideological apprehension. From here, some major concerns occur, that this paper argues upon.

## 2. Clashing trends and perspectives on Learning 2.0

While some teacher and researchers believe that the online medium with all its tolls and extensions can be used to 'revive' the traditional higher education system (Conole & Alevizou, 2010; Lee & McLoughlin, 2010) which is outdated and it became irrelevant for the so-called 'net generation', others consider that they are to disrupt and ultimately alter the fundamental mission of the universities and alter the quality of learning (Keen, 2007; Thomas & Brown, 2011). Some call it just a 'bluff' or an ephemeral trend that will go away in a matter of time. Nonetheless, considering their widespread, enthusiastic use and their great potential cannot be overlooked, even though there have been since the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century accusations of lag between higher education and the rest of the society in embracing the new technologies. Holotescu (2013) argue that that "academia must free itself from its fears, prejudices and arrogance" (p. 30) in order to adapt to the new realities.

The main question is how should universities respond to these trends, what should they do to remain relevant, useful in a digital first world. According to Downes (2010), universities are seen to face distrust and a growing loss of faith amongst younger generations. As Selwyn (2011) highlights, "this clash is particularly evident in terms of the linear and hierarchical ways in which universities set out to structure communication, learning and access to knowledge" (p. 3). Scholars and researchers who are Web 2.0 enthusiasts plead for a constructivist approach in education, for a radical change of the educational model. While the 'old model' directed by objectivist theory (i.e. posits that the goal of teaching is to efficiently transmit knowledge from the expert to the learner) can be described using keywords as formal, unidirectional, teacher centered, directive, the 'web 2.0 model', derived from constructivist theory (i.e. learners actively construct their own knowledge and meaning from their experiences), is connective, student centered, dynamic. Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) argue that "efforts by faculty and students are creating new ways of teaching and learning leading to the emergence of constructs such as e-learning 2.0, pedagogy 2.0, student 2.0, faculty 2.0, and classroom 2.0, with the suffix 2.0 characterizing themes such as openness, personalization, collaboration, social networking, social presence, user-generated content, the people's Web, and collective wisdom, and demarcating areas of higher education where a potentially significant transformation of practice is underway" (p. 4). Moreover, Redecker et al. (2010) argue that through Learning 2.0 both teachers and students can find "new ways to develop their individual skills actively and creatively" (p. 9). Consequently, beyond the 'replacement discourse' and the 'radical change approach', the idea vibes of teachers and students who pursue their learning goals, finding a way of concealing the two apparent opposites trends. The blended learning solution (McCarthy, 2010; Laru et al., 2012) is the one that connects the two worlds by finding communication paths.

## 3. The blessings and the hazards of the 'net generation'

Education 2.0, as an innovative learning direction, centers on learners choice and autonomy. The term proposed by Goodyear and Ellis (2008), 'serious student-centered learning' assumes that learners are no longer 'passive consumers' of content, but 'active co-producers' of knowledge. Consequently, not just teacher and universities should change the approach towards learning, but students too. For them, learning should be a 'participatory, social process' supporting personal life goals and needs (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010). Scholars argue that, in the context of social media, learning has become highly self-motivated, autonomous, and informal, as well as an integral part of the college experience (Solomon & Schrum, 2007; Smith, Salaway, & Caruso, 2009).

### 3.1. Are the digital natives a myth?

The Web 2.0 learner revolution started with Prensky (2001), who named those pertaining to the generation born in the computer age, 'digital natives'. He argues that their educational need differ from the ones of the previous

generations. From there, a series of studies (Leu et al., 2004; Caruso & Salaway, 2007; Dede, 2007) inflicted the idea of a ‘generation gap’ between teachers and students. Nevertheless, some contradict this trend. Several authors (White, 2009; Livingstone, 2010; Stanton & Stanton, 2013) speak about “the myth of the digital natives” arguing that teachers see their students struggling to use the new technologies. Although they are active users of those technologies they remain rather ignorant concerning how they work. According to Ulbrich et al. (2011) “members of the net generation use the web differently, they network differently, and they learn differently. When they start at university, traditional values on how to develop knowledge collide with their values. Many of the teaching techniques that have worked for decades do not work anymore because new students learn differently too. The net generation is used to networking; its members work collaboratively, they execute several tasks simultaneously, and they use the web to acquire knowledge”. According to Conole and Alevizou (2010), “the learner is invited to adopt a conception of knowledge as something available to be personalized or reappropriated” (p. 12). Even if there truly exists a ‘net generation’, that doesn’t mean it would necessarily embrace the idea of using virtual spaces for university related learning. Hosein et al. (2010) said that a distinction between the living technologies (i.e. that students use for social activities) and learning technologies (i.e. that support and enhance learning) must be made. The idea is that while social media has the potential to support learning, doesn’t necessarily mean it will work in this directions. Selwyn (2009) found that 95% of UK students’ interactions on Facebook were completely unrelated to their university studies.

### *3.2. In education doesn’t work as in social life*

Among Web 2.0 tools perceived advantages is the enhancement of collaboration and participation. Yet, in education doesn’t seem to function always as in social life. According to Crook (2008), college students work on a ‘low bandwidth exchange’ of information and knowledge, while they don’t have the skills or the will to use the tools at their true potential (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Waycott et al., 2010). Students use social media platforms mostly for sharing photos or posting personal information on their profile. As Selwyn (2011) explains, “it may also be a mistake to presume that students are necessarily enthused and motivated by the use of social media” (p. 6). Another possible explanation to students’ reluctance in using social media for education is offered by Tapscott and Williams (2007) who say that young people’s “appetite for authenticity means that they are resistant to ill-considered attempts by older generations to ‘speak their lingo’” (p. 54). So, it might not be such a good idea for the teachers to try to act like students. On the other hand, some scholars argue that students might need guidance from to foresee the educational use of Web 2.0 technologies. In this respect, Cigognini, Pettenati, and Edirisingha (2011) think that learners need support, guidance, and pedagogical interventions to make the best possible use of social media to support their learning goals. On the other hand, Conole and Creanor (2007) report that students are autonomous and “have high expectations of how they should learn, selecting the technologies and learning environments that best meet their needs with a sophisticated understanding of how to manipulate these to their advantage” (p. 11). From this perspective, the ideal student profile in a Learning 2.0 environment is one that conveys ‘self regulated skills’ in learning and self-motivation skills in order to learn and improve their knowledge.

While the scholar approaches are preeminently divergent, Selwyn (2011) says that “rather than being a wholly good (or wholly bad) thing for higher education, social media are perhaps best understood in more ambiguous terms. This is especially the case when one considers the complex and often compromised realities of students’ actual uses of social media within educational contexts and in their wider everyday lives” (p. 5). In this respect, some works, not necessarily based on robust empirical research, highlight the ‘dumbing-down’ effects of using Web 2.0 tools to access information and acquire knowledge. Andrew Keen (2007) fears that we are encouraging a “younger generation of intellectual kleptomaniacs” (p. 23). All in all, it is presumed that the students should benefit from the guidance of their teachers who should find an approach in enhancing the positive potential and diminishing the negative one.

## **4. The teacher swaps place with the instructor**

McLoughlin and Lee (2010) highlighted that “educators and institutions are increasingly beginning to recognize that the philosophy and ethos prevalent in the Web 2.0 world in which we live are highly incongruent with the

control culture of education, where teacher-designed content and syllabi dominate” (p. 31). Consequently, the teacher role is changing, too. “In order to stimulate the emerging dynamic learner towards maximum learning achievement, the instructor must be willing to shift gears from ‘what has been’- the Instructor as the sole custodian of knowledge to ‘what is emerging’ - the Instructor and the Learner jointly constructing the learning content and process”, argues Enonbun (2010, p. 23). The teacher’s role is changing from the model of the “actor on a stage” to the one of the ‘attendant’ – “a guide from the sideline” (King, 1993). In this respect, Vlachopoulos and Cowan (2010) categorizes six typologies of teachers that act as mediators in the learning process: (1) *One-track mind* (his main purpose is to track students to learn); (2) *Top of the list* (encourages the participants to finish they work); (3) *Going the second mile* (encourages students to expand their knowledge horizon beyond the task); (4) *Critical friend* (the teacher that develops a friendly relation with the students); (5) *Balancing priorities* (the moderator that directs the student towards a certain aspect that has been misunderstood); (6) *Rescuing* (encourages the students to improve their performances). Siemens (2009) suggests the follow as potential new roles that teachers need to adopt in networked learning environments: amplifying; curating content; way-finding and socially driven sense making; aggregating; filtering; modeling; persistent presence. Ducu (2010) thinks that the teacher must be prepared to co-opt (and not constrain) students as part of the learning act, as they must become a manager or a facilitator of learning. Also he must invest time and effort in building the relationship with the ‘net generation’ students. Ellison and Wu (2008) contend that the nature of the Web 2.0 spaces enable the flexibility of students’ and teachers’ roles (for example a teacher-student role swap) and the development of a feeling of collective pride and responsibility).

Yoo and Huang (2011) came with the idea that cultural difference may influence how students accept technology and how to use it for learning. Conole and Alevizou (2010) highlight that there is a gap between European teachers’ expertise in using Web 2.0 tools in education in comparison with the ones from the Anglo-Saxon countries, in the favor of the last ones. In Romania, teachers’ expertise in these fields is almost insignificant this is way there’s open field for higher education innovation.

## 5. Implication for practice in Romania

### 5.1. The Higher Education System in Romania

In the last twenty-two years, Romania has changed more than fifteen Education Ministers. The numerous displacements were accompanied by unstable and impractical reforms both in high school and higher education. The ‘disruptions’ have shaken the academic environment and diminished teachers and student confidence in the higher education system. According to a recent data made public by the National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (NASO) on March 2014, the dropout rates in Romanian universities, in 2013, were of 40%. Moreover, the public discourse of the last few years highlighted the fact that most of the Romanian Universities don’t provide students the appropriate skills for finding a job in their field of study. The Romanian Higher Education system is considered especially ‘outdated’, incongruous with market realities. According to a study directed by the National Council for Higher Education Funding from 2012, 80% of Romanian faculties’ graduates are not practicing the job for which they have prepared in faculty. Moreover, universities in Romania are below the European average in terms of percentage of graduates that are trained in study area that are important in the European Union (Ofiteru, 2013).

Although the author of this study hasn’t found scholar research that highlights Romanian students’ expectation regarding the relationship between teachers and students, voices emerging on blogs and students reunions point towards the need for a ‘student centered’ higher education system (Cordos, 2012). In this respect, students associations like NASO developed the project “The Bologna Teacher Gala” to award especially the ones that cultivate a good communication relationship with students. Also, since 2011, students’ organizations advocate for the adaptation of the “Status of the Student”, a legal document to guarantee their rights and obligations in the university. The document articles are centered on representation in the decision-making structures and teachers assessment. These aspects reflect that students call for a change in the higher education system and that they are rather discontent with what universities offer them and the pedagogical approach. In this context, the question is what could the teachers and universities that it is in their powers to regain the students’ trust and motivation?

### 5.2. Integrating Web 2.0 technologies in Romanian universities

Taking into account the troubled environment, this paper proposes a rather cautious approach towards a dramatic shift towards a Learning 2.0 for Romanian Universities. As Laru et al. (2012) highlights, too few longitudinal studies or on a large scale have been made in Europe and in Romania, in particular, regarding the Web 2.0 and Social Media integration in the traditional education system. The author of this paper argues that a hasty and uneven adoption of these tools would do more harm than good. On one hand, it could improve the teacher-student relationship, on the other hand, students might be confused if just one or a few teachers try to ‘speak their lingo’. Gouseti (2010) draws the attention on cycle of ‘hype, hope and disappointment’ regarding the adoption of social media as an educational tool. One shouldn’t expect a successful outcome from the first attempt.

In Romania, a group of professionals are working since 2007 on an alternative educational model for higher education – *The Alternative University* –, which integrates the use of Web 2.0 resources and social networks to enhance student centered, collaborative learning. Șerbu (2013) explains that, by function, the new model has the role of: connecting people; sharing knowledge; collaborative knowledge generation; collaborative management platform; knowledge assessment; internal communication platform; external communication platform. By the educational model specific necessities are learning as knowledge construction and accumulation; community building and socialization; strengthening motivation for learning. Recent researches (Popescu, 2010; Stanciu et al., 2012; Holotescu, 2013; Șoitu & Păuleț-Crăiniceanu, 2013) showed that in Romanian universities staff and teachers alike have positive attitudes towards social media tools integration in higher education, even if they don’t actually use these tools or they are equally conscious of their biased nature. As Holotescu (2013) highlights, “perhaps the most significant approach of using Social Media in universities is the fact that it is more a socio-cultural phenomenon, rather than a technical one, an attitude rather than a sum of technologies, the fact that it has become more personal to the students, emphasizing the development of communities of learning and practice and the strength of something done together” (p. 40). Șoitu and Păuleț-Crăiniceanu (2013) study showed that academics believe that the use of Facebook is welcomed and they consider that university’s officials should support it, but at the same time, “although academics recognize the potential of Facebook towards a more open relationship between faculty and students, they fear of the non-compliant behavior of some users” (p. 63). Chihaiia (2012) focuses on the students and infers that the use of collaborative technologies for solving tasks, it has positive results on teamwork and collaboration. Consequently, there’s room for experimentation with the web 2.0 technologies in Romanian Universities.

### 5.3. Proposal of a blended learning model, student & teacher centered

Taking into account the trends in Learning 2.0, scholar perspectives, constructivist theory and the urgent need for a revive of the Romanian higher education system, the author of this paper proposes a blended learning model, which focuses on the idea of cooperation between teacher and student (see Fig. 1). The model is represented under the shape of a pyramid, which has at its basis, centered, the ‘enthusiastic teacher’. He is the one who directs the two main types of interaction: the ‘traditional one’, face-to-face and the Web 2.0 and social media based interaction, which are located at the basis too, but on the margins. In order to support these Web 2.0 didactic activities, he must benefit from universities support and financial resources and to cooperate with his colleagues. Here intervenes the role of the university. In relations with the *face-to-face* interactions, his abilities to guide students play a crucial role in filtering knowledge and to assessing

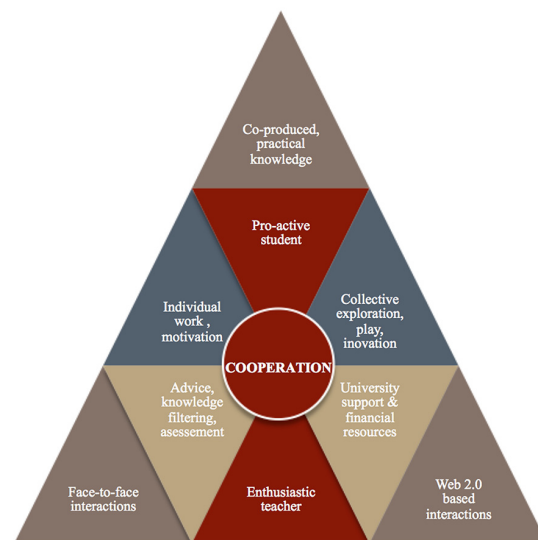


Figure 1. The pyramid of blended learning, centered on the idea of cooperation between student and teacher.

students' work. The student of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be a 'pro-active' student. He must have both the motivation to learn and to work with himself, and the drive to explore issues with his colleges and teachers, to learn by playing and to innovate by learning. According to the model, when the 'enthusiastic teachers' meets the 'pro-active' student on a basis of cooperation, mutual trust and thirst for knowledge the top of the pyramid is reached: the co-produces knowledge, which is useful for the student on real life and is awarding for the teacher. Consequently, in order to acquire the ultimate goal of the education process, teacher and students should work alongside. The model is both student and teacher centered and neither one of them is seen as passive or sitting on the sidelines of the educational process. According to the model, both teacher and student could benefit from Web 2.0 interactions in order to enhance collaboration and cooperation, but institutional help is needed. Yet, the traditional communication remains equally important for a good cooperation between teacher and students, while it represents the base ground of the relationship.

This model is grounded on the premise that the condition for a successful blended learning is the enthusiasm and will of both teacher and student to develop a knowledge-gathering-based inter-connection. While this may be considered and idealist approach and a drawback of the model, the author of this study argues that the constructivist theory on learning and the Web 2.0 philosophy are based on this premise. Translated into Romanian realities, the model offers an alternative to the boredom and powerless rebellions of both students and teachers, highlighting the need for a change in attitude: the students shouldn't expect the teacher to do all the work and to be pro-active, willing to learn, and teachers should find the way to engage students in the information gathering adventures making use of Web 2.0 tools and face-to-face reunions.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of the biased nature and contrastive perspectives on Learning 2.0. Under the pressure of a 'replacement discourse', the role of the student, teacher and university are under pressure to change. The author of the study argues for a tuning in attitude for all the members in the education 'business', without altering the institutionalized education values. This transformation wouldn't necessary address the issues in Romanian higher education, but could help the troubled faculty-student interaction, in order to regain the confidence in the educational process. The proposed educational model, which centers on student and teacher alike, is grounded on the idea that universities can experiment with Web 2.0 trends in a constructivist direction, without assuming unnecessary risks, but addressing the faculty-students relationship and status issue.

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